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Clearfield residents fear distant rumble of tanks

By Tom Gibb

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Landowners have signed agreements to sell the state 4,757 acres in Clearfield County, almost all of the land the Pennsylvania National Guard wants for a controversial tank training center.

Now comes the question of whether the Guard can sell the idea to its would-be neighbors, some of whom have been publicly restive. And if it can't, then comes the question of what happens to both the plan and \$4.37 million in state money allotted to pay for the property.

The Guard wants to use the site 15 miles northeast of Clearfield as a tank training center, making it the only maneuvers area other than

Fort Indiantown Gap, which sprawls across 19,200 acres of Lebanon and Dauphin counties northeast of Harrisburg.

The state Department of General Services, real estate broker for state agencies, said yesterday that the commonwealth has signed agreements with six sets of sellers. Those agreements would have Pennsylvania pay \$4.37 million when the deals are closed — by May 31 under the current plan.

That leaves General Services to seal deals on another 900 to 1,000 acres the Guard wants.

Michael Adams, General Services' real estate bureau director, said yesterday he expects the Guard to go ahead with its plan. Guard officials, though, insist they'll

listen to public opinion.

"If the neighbors don't want us there, believe me, we don't want to be there," state Adjutant Gen. William Lynch told the state House Appropriations Committee at hearings last week. "If the neighbors simply let us know they don't want us there, we'll go away."

Guard representatives expect to meet with Girard supervisors tomorrow night, speak to Clearfield service clubs late this month, then woo neighbors April 6 and 7 during public meet-and-greet sessions at a fire hall in Leontes Mills, on the fringe of the training area.

But at the lone public session so far — a House Democratic Policy Committee hearing in Clearfield three months ago — area residents

and lawmakers charged that the Guard would bring noise and pollution and slash land values.

"The deal reeks of arrogance," state Rep. Camille "Bud" George, D-Clearfield County, said in a statement released by his office last week.

Last month, Girard supervisors received a 100-signature petition opposing the training center.

Sales agreements allow the Guard to forfeit 5 percent — \$218,595 of the sales prices negotiated so far — and walk away from the deals if it finds deed entanglements or environmental problems it doesn't want to buy into. The agreements, though, make no provision for canceling because of hostile neighbors.

General Services spokeswoman Samantha Elliott refused comment on what happens in that case, calling it "hypothetical." But Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver, a Guard spokesman, said yesterday that the Guard could, indeed, walk away.

"I spent time with our legal folks and they say there's enough latitude in the documents that we'd lose 5 percent ... and nothing more," he said.

Rep. Peter Zug, a Lebanon County Republican whose district includes Fort Indiantown Gap, calls the Guard "great stewards of the Lebanon Valley." But the Guard is offering Clearfield County's laggard economy no promise of a bonanza.

A maximum of 200 Guard members would train at a time, many of

them housed in local motels, Cleaver said. But the training center would employ fewer than 30 people and the land would come off the tax lists.

House committee members charged that the state chose the land and overpaid because the bulk of it is coal-company property owned by C. Alan Walker of Clearfield County, a major Republican contributor. Walker, the Guard and spokesmen for Gov. Ridge deny those charges, and Elliott said a Clearfield-area appraiser has looked at the property.

"The decisions on this property were made by good soldiers for sound training reasons alone," Lynch said, "and I concur with those decisions."